Aquatic Wildlife - Habitat

Aquatic habitats on the Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forests are important in sustaining threatened and sensitive aquatic wildlife populations. These lands also provide for recreational fishing opportunities that exist well outside of national forest boundaries.

Fun Facts

The last known pure westslope cutthroat trout population in the entire Sun River System is on the Lewis and Clark National Forest.

Fish geneticists at the University of Montana have traced the colonization of westslope cutthroat trout on the east side of the continental divide to the Summit Pass area. *The fish in the picture to the right is from the closest remaining remnant of this origin.*

Headwater streams on the Helena National Forest contribute bulltrout genetics to some of the furthest downstream tributaries of the Blackfoot River.

Many of the trout in the nationally famous Smith and Missouri Rivers spawn in streams on the Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forests. *A radio-tagged rainbow trout from the Missouri River near Great Falls made an epic spawning run. It migrated through the Smith River to a tributary in upper Sheep Creek.*

Photograph courtesy of Dave Yerk—MT Fish, Wildlife, and Parks

A genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout from a tributary within the Two Medicine River System. Efforts started in 2012 to safeguard this at-risk population by replicating it in an adjacent tributary. A cascade will better protect the second population from hybridization with non-native species.

Aquatic habitats are comprised of three different kinds of features:

1. Physical components (examples—pool depth, spawning gravel, water temperature)
2. Biological factors (examples—streamside vegetation, aquatic insects, introduced fish)
3. Natural processes (examples—streamflow regime, sediment yield, wildfire regime)

As we develop information regarding aquatic ecosystems for the Forest Plan Revision assessment phase, we will be evaluating the status of key aquatic habitats.

A comprehensive effort was conducted in 2011 to assess watershed and aquatic habitat conditions across these two forest using a national methodology called "Watershed Condition Framework" (WCF). The charts below show the number of sub-watersheds in each of the three condition classes. Historic mining impacts account for nearly all of the sub-watersheds given a rating of "poor" for overall condition class. WCF calls are examples of information that will be used in the assessment.